

Original Paper

The Importance of Students Engaging in Anti-Racism Education:

A Case Study

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Abstract

While adults generally acknowledge that children are susceptible by what they see and hear in their social surrounds, many do not believe children can be shaped by racist discourse. Based on anti-racism learning outcomes achieved among two cohorts of 12-14-year-old Grade Eight students—the entirety of who initially held racist perspectives of Aboriginal Australians, this paper argues the need for schools to engage all students in anti-racism education.

Keywords

racism, prejudice, anti-racism education, pro-social learning, socio-emotional learning

1. The Impact of Racism on Children and Society

Research has found that where racism (beliefs of superiority of one race or ethnicity over others) exists in social discourse, the language and behaviour of children is all too often shaped by it (Connolly & Hoskens, 2006; York, 2016). It has been observed that even at a young age, children commence identifying points of difference they have with people of other ethnicities and cultures, but more so, can start to show aversive responses toward them (Connolly & Hoskens, 2006). York (2016) contends children are not “colour-blind” but develop basic understandings of race-related differences and power relationships from which they determine who to play with and who to exclude.

Children pick up race-related understandings, language and behaviour from a range of influences, including storybooks, films, nursery rhymes and other media (Christensen, 2017). Christensen (2017, pp. 4-5) refers to the “secret education” children are often exposed to in children’s film and literature, that “depict the domination of one sex, one race, one class, or one country over a weaker counterpart”. In this secret education, white people are commonly cast as heroes, whereas non-white people are often portrayed as tokenistic sidekicks or villains. From such influences, children commence believing white

people talk properly, think more cleverly, look better and, all round, are better (York, 2016).

It is important to respond appropriately to racism, as it has a devastating impact on children's intellectual, social and emotional development (Katz, 2003). Katz (2003) elaborates on how racism prevents its bearer from identifying individual traits of people they associate as being from another group, and from becoming knowledgeable, healthy, socially skilled, responsible and contributing citizen. Also impacted is the mental and physical health of the people racism is directed at (Paradies, Harris, & Anderson, 2008; Priest, Paradies, Trennery, Truong, Karlsen, & Kelly, 2012), with recipients of racism experiencing anxiety, sickness and social and fiscal exclusion (Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007).

But confronting racism is a challenging task, as prejudices can be hidden or justified, or both, victims of racism who speak out can be accused of playing the race card' and educational initiatives to address prejudice labelled a witch hunt (Heaton, 2014). From nearly as early as children can develop prejudices, they can learn to hide it behind a "veneer of tolerance", while behind this veneer these thoughts and feelings continue to grow (Kivel, 2017). When racism and other prejudice comes to public light excuses and justifications can be made, such as the reason for excluding someone being due to his or her accent, or choice of music or food (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 2004).

But it's because racism can fester and grow unseen, often emerging later into adulthood (National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), 2013), that it is essential for all students to engage in anti-racism education.

3. Race-Relations and an Anti-Racism Educational Initiative in Australia

Like in numerous other nations where people of European origin comprise a large proportion of the population, in Australia notions of white superiority are not difficult to find (Priest et al., 2012). Since the uninvited arrival of the British First Fleet in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been on the receiving end of such race-related notions and ensuing discrimination. Stained with a history of government-sanctioned massacres in Aboriginal communities, dispossession of Aboriginal lands and forcible removal of Aboriginal children (Craven, 2011), the young nation continues to marginalise and victimise First Australians (Paradies et al., 2008; Priest et al., 2012). More than a quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth reported having experienced racial discrimination in 2015 (ABS, 2016).

It is in part due to the national shame of past and present national race-relations that Australian schoolteachers often do not teach about (and students do not learn about) Aboriginal peoples and their histories, cultures and achievements (Craven, 2011). Research shows that reasons for this can include teachers not being knowledgeable about, concerned about and/or ill-equipped to teach on the topic (NSW Government, 2013; Craven, 2011). On the occasion Dreaming stories about the creation of the land, seas and sky are shared with students, minimal context or background is provided, which often results in the further entrenching of racist stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples and their histories and

cultures (Craven, 2011).

It was due to the belief that all Australian students should engage in anti-racism education and develop an appreciation for Aboriginal peoples and their histories, cultures and achievements, and also due to opportunity that the author of this paper, in his capacity as a Grade Eight teacher, engaged two classes in an anti-racism program of learning. Prior to engaging in the program, the 12-14-year-old students identified they had only met a few Aboriginal people, and had developed their general understandings about them from what they had heard from family members, friends, teachers, and media personalities. All 47 students in the two classes completed a Likert-scale survey in which they responded to statements about the characteristics of Aboriginal peoples, which revealed that the entirety of students had been shaped by racist discourse they had heard about Aboriginal people. All but one student selected “agree” or “strongly agree” in response to a large number of negative characteristics describing Aboriginal people the survey put to them (e.g., “Aboriginal people are ... aggressive”, “...unintelligent”, “...bad parents”, etc.), and selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree” in response to many of the intermingled positive antonyms (e.g., “...approachable”, “...intelligent”, “...good parents”, etc.). All but one also responded in a similar fashion to a photograph of an unknown Aboriginal boy; while they selected “agree” and “strongly agree” to an unknown white boy in another photograph having positive characteristics. The one student who was the exception selected “unsure” in response to all the characteristics but had been observed making derogatory jokes about Aboriginal people the week before the program commenced. Later, when reflecting on their engagement in the program, numerous students identified on their own accord that their initial thoughts and feelings toward Aboriginal people in general were prejudiced, even racist.

In recognition of continued strained race-relations, including misrepresentations of Aboriginal peoples and their histories and cultures in social and media discourse that may well have shaped the Grade Eight students’ perspectives of them, the program of learning was designed to show case alternative, positive images and messages about Aboriginal people. In consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal educators and elders, images and messages were selected and sequenced to provide students with a chronological introduction of the experiences and resilience of Aboriginal people. Early lessons introduced students to some cultural aspects of Aboriginal cultures from before British arrival, aspects they learnt are still often practiced in Aboriginal communities today. Students were then presented with some historical race-related injustices, including genocidal activities against several Aboriginal communities and the more recent forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families (Craven, 2011). Contemporary injustices were next of focus, including lower outcomes in education, employment, health, housing and life expectancy still experienced by Aboriginal people as compared to the rest of Australia’s population (Sarra, 2011), and racist myths and stereotypes about Aboriginal people (Reconciliation Australia, 2018). Throughout all this, and then when learning about contemporary achievements of Aboriginal people, the resilience of the Aboriginal population was reinforced, and students imagined and reflected on what it might be like to experience what they learnt

about.

Over the duration of the program, students not only reflected on what they were learning but also on how they were reconsidering and changing their thoughts and feelings about Aboriginal people. At the end of the program the initial survey was repeated to identify any new perspectives students might hold as a result of what they had learnt. This time, most of the students selected “agree” and “strongly agree” to Aboriginal people having the positive characteristics, and “disagree” and “strongly disagree” to them holding the negative characteristics (for a fuller account see Heaton, 2018). Numerous students reflected on how they not only now understand many Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people in general, to be “just like us”, but also “amazing”, “brilliant” and a range of other positive things. Perhaps more importantly, most students also acknowledged that no group of people should be considered and treated as inferior.

4. Summary

It is because racism persists, children are often shaped by it yet hide it and something can be done about it that schools should engage all students in innovative, sensitive and effective anti-racism initiatives. Findings presented in this paper show that a positive discourse about Aboriginal people and their histories and cultures can have Australian school students rethink what they had previously heard about them and believed from in social and media discourse. Schools in other nations can similarly present positively framed discourse about minority groups local to them that experience prejudice and discrimination, to also achieve a shift in students’ perspectives. It is not only necessary for their intellectual, social and emotional development, but also for the wellbeing of all those who would otherwise be on the receiving end of it, and for broader society as a whole.

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